Romantic Poetry: Introduction

Any serious student of literature will agree that Romanticism and Classicism alternately dominate literary taste though there are periods when these two overlap and there are works whose sensibility and style come from two different schools. But what is the definition of Romanticism? For Schlegel, Romantic literature presents 'emotional matter in an imaginative form'. For Baudelaire, Romanticism consists ' neither in choice of subjects nor exact truth, but in a way of feeling'. For Schelling, whereas 'the classic temper studies the past, the romantic neglects it... it leads us forward and creates new precedents.' Pater defined Romanticism as 'strangeness added to beauty.' Admittedly, it is too fluid a term to be precisely characterized. F.L. Lucas counted as many as 11,396 definitions of Romanticism. One feels there is some merit in A.O. Lovejoy's proposal: "We should learn to use the word 'Romanticism' in the plural".

In English the word 'Romantic' was first used in 1659 in the current sense. Derived from 'romaunt', meaning 'romance', it was used to describe the strange and exotic world of enchanted castles, captive princesses and the like. The word was used to describe those Mediaeval and Renaissance writings which did not derive from the Classical. It is in this sense that Shakespeare is Romantic, not Ben Jonson. Romantic literature generally focuses on solitary life rather than social life. It is marked by free

play of the imagination, originality of approach and use of lyrical prose in novel, essay and criticism. The spiritual essence of Romanticism has been variously conceived to be a passion for moon light, for Gothic churches & for talking exclusively about oneself. Considering all these Rene Wellek says that the three features common to most Romantic art are (i) Nature as subject, (ii) Imagination as the creative force and (iii) Imagery/mythology as the media.

Since by origin 'Romanticism' suggests the non-classical, it is worth pointing out where it departs from the Classical norm. The classical spirit, as understood by the English neo-classicists, consists in measured expression of measured thought. Classicism signifies emotional restraint, technical precision, dictional elegance, wit and correctness. Since Romanticism implies rejection of the ideals and rules of Classicism, emotional exuberance, dictional novelty, energy and excitement are held as the hallmark of Romanticism. Romantic artists prefer innovation to traditionalism and tend to break away from the fixed metrical pattern embodied in the Heroic couplet. In so far as the process of poetic composition is concerned, it is not artful manipulation of words but something that comes naturally, spontaneously. Keats meant this when he said: 'If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all'. Imitation, not only of nature but principally of classical masters, is the mainspring of a classicist. The Romantic artist generally subscribes to the theory that art is conceived at the heightened state of inspiration. The words of the cloud-borne child in Blake

Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read

have a bearing on this view on art—that it is a product of inspiration, not perspiration, of vision, not revision, of dream-conception, not ardently persistent 'stitching and

unstitching', to borrow the words of W.B.Yeats. In short, whereas Classicism is conservative in its approach to art, Romanticism is marked by an energetic revolt.

The spirit of revolt, which is strongly perceptible in Romanticism revived in the early 19th century, is not confined to the stylistic field alone. As most 19th century Romantic poets were directly or indirectly influenced by the mottoes of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity that governed the French Revolution, Romanticism evinces a flagrant disregard for aristocratic socio-political norms. The picture of the poet as a man speaking to men instead of to the patron King or Lord, and the Romantic preference for simple rustic themes are the offshoot of the egalitarian zeal fired by the French Revolution. The Romantics sought to transcend the existing order of reality—Blake by imagination, Wordsworth by nature, Coleridge by the supernatural, Shelley by revolt, Byron by his fight for liberty and Keats by beauty.

Intellectually, Romanticism may be viewed as a reaction against the Enlightenment, which exalted reason and scientific spirit over religion and tradition. The architects of the Enlightenment held that the universe is subject to rational scrutiny, that reason alone can reveal the truth to man. They challenged dogmatic authority and subjected existing truths to rational scrutiny. Romanticism spread over Europe in the late 18th and early 19th century as a reaction against this empirical deterministic worldview, condemned by Keats in the following lines from *Lamia*:

> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
> Unweave a rainbow.

Romantic interest in the supernatural may be explained as an imaginative protest against the retarding effect of 'the dull brain', which has no room for mysteries and miracles in human life.

A.N. Whitehead has described the Romantic Revival as an idealist reaction against the mechanical materialism that prevailed in the 18th century. Materialism assumes that matter or physical substance in general, as opposed to spirit or mind, exists per se as a cognizable entity. Incidentally, it was Kant who first voiced a critique of objective reality. He contended that 'things in themselves' could never be seen except through human point of view. The external thus becomes a construction of the mind, which is the essence of idealism. Coleridge's lines

O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live

illustrates the typically Romantic attitude to the phenomenal world.

'Idealism' also signifies that ideals—the perfect, the flawless, the best possible—are not really utopian. They can be achieved and are worth attaining. The Industrial Revolution of the 18th century and all its concomitant evils—smoke, soot, dust, child labour, prostitution, the slums, the unhygienic living conditions, the exploitation of the labour class, the draconian laws—made the world almost uninhabitable. Romanticism consists in a recoil from this ugly present, in an escape into the ideal world represented by the nightingale or the Grecian urn, even in a zeal to purge the society of manifold imperfections, as voiced in the poems of Shelley.

It is this quest for some unspoiled beauty, never to be found in the 'chartered street' of an industrial town ('God made the country, man made the town'), that led the Romantics to be antipathetic to society and to worship Nature. Wordsworth philosophized Nature, Keats was drawn to it for its sensuous qualities, and Nature was a source of revolutionary inspiration for Shelley and Byron. Incidentally, the Romantic attitude to Nature is absolutely different from that of a geologist or a botanist. Nature is not the aggregate of phenomena of the material

world but a spirit inhering them. The philosophical postulate involved here is that the Supreme is one although it assumes myriad forms. Since the spirit is one, there is an essential bond between man and Nature. And since it manifests itself through the phenomenal objects, Nature is the door to the sublime and the landscape is a stimulus to some deeper reflection. No wonder that in Romantic poetry the landscape often becomes the mindscape and behind most depiction of Nature there is almost always a search for the numinous, the transcendental world underlying the natural.

Another form of Romantic protest against the squalor of Industrialization and search for some heaven on earth is the idealization of the past and the bygone. Sometimes it manifests in the form of a fascination with the myths and mysticism of the Middle Ages, sometimes a nostalgia for childhood, the individual human past. One understands why Wordsworth, cashing in upon the myth of the Fall, exalted childhood experiences over those of an adult:

> Heaven lies about us in our infancy
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy.

The Romantic artist can hardly come to terms with life and its 'giant agony'. As an idealist rather than a social activist, he always searches for the ideal - be it love or beauty. Nympholepsy, a yearning, a frenzied passion for the unattainable, is therefore at the heart of all Romanticism. As the ideal exists only in imagination, the quintessence of Romanticism is not escape but heart-break, the realization that all escape is after all transitory, that the ivory tower of the imagination is a fragile one. The typically Romantic yearning for the unattainable and melancholy consequent upon this desire have been finely expressed by Shelley in "One Word is Too Often Profaned";

The desire of the moth for the star
Of the night for the morrow,
A devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.

To define Romanticism exclusively in terms of reaction and revolt against classicism, Materialism, the scientific-materialistic worldview induced by the Enlightenment is to belittle the more positive aspects of Romanticism, which can be captured from the Romantic attitude to the human mind and the imagination. The Romantic artist opposes Locke's views that the human mind is a 'passive' receptacle of images ready-formed from without. For him the mind is not a mere 'mirror', but a radiant projector, a 'lamp'. Inspired by the German philosophers, he believes that it is the mind, which helps us to move from sensation to perception and even beyond that to reflection and intuition. He is, therefore, sceptical about the truth-revealing power of sensory organs. Blake's words in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* are worth quoting in this context:

> I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a sight. I look thro' *it and not with it.*
>
> (Emphasis added)

The Romantic artist further holds that the mind possesses a faculty to penetrate the façade and enjoy glimpses into the spiritual reality hidden beneath the material. This idea has been finely expressed in the following lines from "The Retreat" by Vaughan, a pre-Romantic poet:

When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity.

("The Retreat", Vaughan)

It is hard to agree with Paul Elmer More who describes this aspect of Romanticism as the 'illusion of beholding the infinite within the stream of finite itself.'

Actually, Romanticism registers a shift from the objective to the subjective. Taking the cue from Kant that independent of human mind things in themselves are non-existent in perception, Hegel contends that what is real is *geist* or self. This explains the precedence of the subjective, the individual point of view, over the objective in Romantic literature. Indeed, subjectivism is the keynote of Romanticism, for it views man, the subject, as a reservoir of infinite potentialities. But the Romantic artist is egotistical not in the sense that he is conceited but in the sense that he is eager to share what he considers his unique feelings with others.

C.M. Bowra has convincingly maintained that what distinguishes Romanticism from Classicism is the importance attached to the imagination and the special view held of it. Imagination is not just an image-making faculty in Romantic art; it not only bodies forth the forms of things unknown, it is essentially a creative faculty. It is capable of blending diverse experiences and discordant elements into a harmonious whole. It is the imagination, as distinct from desultory fancy, which, according to the Romantics, is the source of truth not amenable to sensuous perception or intellectual comprehension. Keats' words in a letter to Benjamin Bailey help us understand the typically Romantic attitude to the imagination:

> What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth — whether it existed before or not... The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.

At its height, it enables illuminations akin to the realization of a mystic.

> To see a World in a grain of sand
> And Heaven in a Wild Flower
> To Hold Infinity in the Palm of your Hand
> And Eternity in an Hour.
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> ("Auguries of Innocence", Blake)

When we fail to adjust our focus to the Romantic angle we show proneness to dismiss this insight as 'a sickness of the spirit and a disorganizing irruption of subjectivism'.

To sum up, subjectivity, intensity of emotion and organic, as distinct from mechanistic, concept of the imagination constitute the essence of Romanticism. While acknowledging the literary significance of Romanticism, modern criticism has pointed out some of its limitations. Feminists, for example, have found a gender bias in Romantic attitude to Nature and Love. Nature is characterized as feminine, but significance is always reserved for the transcendental, which is associated with the masculine. Even in Romantic love rather than presenting the female as a valued other, 'the male lover usually effaces her into a narcissistic projection of his own self'.

The subject of Romantic poetry is the self; when the Romantic poet is preoccupied with his self it is assumed that he has virtually two selves. Wordsworth the poet expresses Wordsworth the man. The centre is the self then and the circumference is nature, human nature (characters), love, society etc. that impinge on the above self and get authenticated by it. The result is construction of an imaginative order transcending the quotidian one. The vehicle of transcendence varies from poet to poet. When later on Eliot called for poetry as an escape from personality he was being covertly Romantic, for whereas individuality is determined by self, personality implies preparing a face, that is, assuming a social self. Escape from personality thus is an escape from the surface to the depth. According to this view, Modernism is an edited version of Romanticism, of course minus its effusion, effervescence, exuberance without which one hesitates to recognize it as Romantic.